

March 2021

## **BALANCING ACT: WHEN GENDER AND MEDIA COLLIDE IN SPORTS**

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# **BALANCING ACT: WHEN GENDER AND MEDIA COLLIDE IN SPORTS**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

Theanship School of Mass Communication

by  
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B.A., University of South Florida, 2016  
May 2021

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## **ABSTRACT**

Women's Gymnastics is one of the most popular events at the Summer Olympic Games and media coverage of the team provides a unique perspective on women's athletics, as gymnastics is traditionally considered a feminine sport. Utilizing a discourse analysis, this thesis examines the newspaper coverage received by the team in the last 25 years. This thesis explores the narratives regarding gender within the coverage and additionally explores how abuse narratives were discussed in news media throughout these years. This research shows that how female gymnasts are discussed is growing in type of coverage received, meaning that how female gymnastics is discussed has transitioned from narratives of "small girls" to "athletes" and "women" while also presenting evidence of how sexual assault and abuse coverage, especially regarding victims, still has room for growth.

## INTRODUCTION

Beginning with the 1996 Olympic Games, the US women's gymnastics team has become the most dominant gymnastics team in the World. Having medaled in every team event since 1996 in conjunction with producing the top individual athletes and all-around competition winners four of the last six Olympic games, there is no question to the US women's dominance (USA Gymnastics, n.d.). This command of the sport –a sport later marred by a sexual abuse scandal that was largely kept a secret – provides the foundation for a study of how news media look at the athletes who make up the US women's gymnastics team. In this thesis, I will explore how female athletes are represented by news media by examining the framing narratives of how gymnasts are depicted in articles referencing the USA gymnastics team. Specifically, I am interested in how female athletes in this sport are represented in the last 25 years of newspaper coverage. How has the age of the athletes, the intricacies of the sport itself, the team and individual dynamics been discussed?

Gymnastics as a case study presents an interesting dynamic, as this is one of the few sports that centers on the female athlete as opposed to the male athlete. The successes of these women, who are often described as small children, as opposed to strong and dominant athletes, highlights a myriad of issues not only within USA Gymnastics, but also within the larger context of how female athletes are treated and discussed in media and society (Kirby, 2018). This is particularly troubling when juxtaposed with the Larry Nassar abuse scandal

Given the continued growth in popularity of women's sports (Andrews, 2018), representations of how women are portrayed has a pronounced impact on how women who compete in sports are viewed in terms of gender and power. Additionally, how women are portrayed can impact issues surrounding body image. All of this makes this case study especially relevant today, as it is important to look at how a sport that is made up primarily of young girls is

talked about, due to the potential impacts on future young women. Moreover, the tragic case of Larry Nassar's crimes provides an opportunity to better understand the extent to which – if at all – abuse and assault affects the narrative of a sport that largely exists (at least in the public psyche) during the Olympics, a time of patriotism and perceived American exceptionalism. If, what are presented as the greatest of Americans are subjected to a system of abuse and essentially rendered powerless, we can aim to look at how they were discussed in the past in an attempt to change the narrative for future audiences, not only for the personal safety of individuals, but in an attempt to prevent future atrocities of this scale again.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Women in Sports Coverage**

Overall, female athletes have traditionally received less coverage than their male counterparts when news media report on athletics (Shifflett & Revelle, 1994; Anderson, 2020). When female athletes are covered by news media, scholarship finds that they are primarily framed under two categorical umbrellas: eroticization of the female body and/or the conceptualization of the female athlete as child-like (Weaving, 2016; Ponterotto, 2014). A content analysis of Sports Illustrated covers alone provides supporting evidence that portrayal of female athletes in media has remained stagnant since the enactment of Title IX and beyond direct cover representation, how females have been portrayed highlights that the female athlete is less important than the male athlete (Weber & Carini, 2012, Mcclearen, 2018).

Research also demonstrates that if media were utilized more effectively, those outlets would be the biggest avenue for women to gain an interest in viewing or playing sports. When feminism and sports intersect, there are positive and negative outcomes, such as in the Christopherson et al. (2002) research, where the authors conducted an analysis of articles about the 1999 Women's World Cup finding that coverage of the women athletes fell along gendered stereotypes including their status as women, defined as their appearance, discussion of the athletes as mothers, in addition to conversations surrounding to the athlete's adherence to femininity even when being discussed as tough or playing a masculine sport. Even when the articles were framed as positive, these stereotypes were present, used to define athletes along traditional gender roles. Literature also denotes how the media promotes or constructs certain gender ideologies and how these ideologies carry over into other aspects, like sports (Christopherson, Janning, & McConnell, 2002). For example, research about female athletes discuss how they are mothers and have families as opposed to articles that discuss male athletes

focusing on their athletic prowess. Additionally, research shows that articles about female athletes are full of contradictions, as journalists aim to highlight athletic prowess in conjunction of discussing the novelty of female athletic prowess. The framing used in articles can contribute significantly to the popularity of a given sport or event, because if readers feel a connection to a given sport or athlete, they are more likely to engage with content about the individual or sport.

One of the biggest impacts in this area of literature has been found regarding the audience. When female athletes are portrayed in a manner that highlights their athletic prowess, the readers' responses largely indicate this is empowering women, as it emphasizes the strength of women overall. For example, in the Daniel's (2012) experimental study where readers were shown images of female athletes in a range of scenarios – from athletic competition to glamour photo shoots – readers responded more positively to the athletic competition shots. In contrast to the research conducted by Weber and Carini (2012), additional research indicates that regardless of positive or negative storylines, media representation of female athletes has progressed, to more coverage of the individual or a given sport over time (Delorme, 2014).

### ***Sexualization***

Sexualization of female athletes saturates media, whether it be through direct commentary on women's bodies or through humor (Duncan, 2009). Comments such as “pretty,” “beautiful,” “delicious” or “super sexy body” permeate the conversation both in online communication regarding the body of female athlete in addition to print media (Kavanagh, Litchfield, & Osborne, 2019). Especially when describing female athletes' performance, which is essentially female athletes workplace, this commentary perpetuates sexualization stereotypes, highlighted by talking about physical fitness or physical shape of women's bodies. This commentary has translated to a digital space due to the saturation of social media in society, however, it stems



from societal norms of commentary on women's bodies. Additionally, the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (APA, 2008, p. 2) defines sexualization as:

(a) a person's value only comes from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, (b) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy, (c) a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making, (d) sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

This comprehensive definition highlights the issues of sexualization of women and girls across age and, when compared with media consumption of both males and females in addition to adults or children, impacts how viewers engage with women's bodies in media and highlights what is appropriate versus what is not. When utilizing this framework in their study in “Sexualization, Youthification, and Adulthood: A Content Analysis of Images of Girls and Women in Popular Magazines,” Ashton Speno and Jennifer Aubrey (2018) found that magazines often infantilized adult women, however, they largely adultified, or made to appear older, young females. While the authors found the main audience for adulthood was teenage girls, the adulthood of minors is problematic as it translates to other venues, such as young female athletes and the appearance of maturity when, they are still young and sexualization can set a dangerous premise. Additionally, when presented with an athlete who has been sexualized in media coverage, audiences are more likely to find them less capable as athletes as the coverage is not about their athletic prowess and additional commentary detracts from any athletic feats (Harrison & Secarea, 2010; Sherry, Osborne, & Nicholson, 2016).

Studies outside of sports, such as a study of how female politicians are portrayed, show that women are still sexualized, even when media attempts to discuss them regardless of gender, as commentary in these mediums aim to conduct the opposite type of coverage, leading to sexualization being prevalent even when unintended (Lundell & Ekström, 2008). This premise

translates to athletic coverage, as even when media aims to cover male and female athletes equitably, female athletes still receive more sexualized and stereotypical commentary (Sherry, Osborne, & Nicholson, 2016).

### ***Infantilization***

In a detailed analysis of more than 500 advertisements, Erving Goffman (1979) looked at how women and men were positioned in advertisements. He compared women's lower heads with men's straight-on gazes, men's strong grasps versus women's light touches, women's over-the-top emotional displays with men's reserved semblances, and more. The relationship between men and women, was shown as a parent to child-like relationship, highlighted by the characterization of men in a position of power and women in a position of subordination. In a continuation of this idea, female athletes are often portrayed visually as lower to the ground or crouching in photographs, while men are portrayed in action or authoritative shots, which continues to perpetuate the stereotype of weakness and youth (Duncan & Messner, 2003). Additionally, women are infantilized when they are treated with a lack of authoritative respect by sports commentators who will refer to male athletes by last name and female athletes by their first names or discuss female gymnasts as girls, but male gymnasts are not referenced as boys (Duncan & Messner, 2003; Messner, Duncan & Jensen, 1993).

Additionally, athletes participating in more aesthetically pleasing sports, including gymnastics and figure skating, get points for being pretty and feminine that additionally align with stereotypes of femininity or weakness, dependency, emotion or submissiveness, which feed the stereotype of infantilization (Shugart, 2003; Koivula, 1999). This premise leaves little room for female athletes to have autonomy not only over their bodies but also over their successes in athletics. Infantilization-like commentary, such as referring to women as girls, can result in

women feeling less confident in their abilities or put them in a position to be deferential when in actuality they are capable of being leaders or in the forefront of their field (Macarthur, 2015).

### **Coverage of Sexual Abuse/Assault Victims**

Sexual abuse coverage by media outlets predominately focuses on the individual, specific incident level occurrence as opposed to a broader societal issue regarding sexual abuse (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020; Abhilasha & Kakade, 2016). News stories are also predominately reactionary to events of sexual abuse, only discussing the problem as sensational topic, especially regarding child sexual abuse (Kitzinger & Skidmore, 1995). Additionally, even though research shows that media coverage has transitioned into viewing sexual abuse as a societal problem, individual level solutions, such as harsher sentencing of sexual abusers, are still framed as a better option, even if societal changes would have a broader impact, such as law changes or policies addressing systemic power structure issues (Weatherred, 2016).

In “Media Framing of Larry Nassar and the USA Gymnastics Child Sex Abuse Scandal,” Lauren Reichart Smith and Ann Pegoraro (2020) discuss how the media looks at sexual abuse, presenting that the circumstances in which the abuse occurred – in their case, women’s sports – is highly important to the narratives taken away by the public (p. 16). Specifically, the authors noted that outrage by the public did not occur until victims with name recognition came forward and stories were largely ignored by the public while the U.S. Women’s team was “dominating in Rio,” (p.17). Mancini and Shields’ (2014) research also supports the premise of context being important when media presents abuse, as was the case when covering the scandal within the Catholic Church. Camille Aroustamian (2020) studied how new media framed articles discussing the Brock Turner, Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein assault cases, and she noted that articles

about sexual assault often use euphemisms, continue to portray stereotypes, favor the perpetrator in coverage, show skepticism towards survivors and additionally sensationalize the crimes.

Racial narratives and frames are also important when looking at studies about sexual abuse media coverage. Research shows that white female victims are highly visible whereas black female victims are more invisible. Additionally, male centric media underrepresent the importance of sexual violence as an issue and focus more on narratives of false accusations and false convictions, though this issue is prevalent across other mediums as well (Lykke, 2015; Bonnes, 2013).

### **Olympic Coverage**

Mega-sports events, such as the Olympics have always received a large amount of coverage in the media with an international spotlight (Rojas-Torrijos, 2020). Coverage of the Olympics falls under multiple categories, primarily focusing on nationalism or political symbolism in varying ways. In one vein, countries tend to utilize their own media platforms to highlight political issues that are important to them; for example, Brazil utilized the opening ceremony of the 2016 Rio games to present environmental issues as important (Sajna, 2018). In conjunction, nations also harness the profound media spotlight around the Olympics for economic gains through tourism and cultural programming (Kasimati, 2003; Garcia, 2008). International perception, as ushered by Olympic coverage, is important, and if the media coverage does not adequately align with how the Games played out, the impression of the host city and tangentially the host nation can potentially be tarnished, such as with the media coverage of the 1996 Atlanta Games (Rivenburgh, 2008).

Additional political issues are also highlighted by the media here and are usually parallel to the political situation of a given nation at the time of the Games (Straub & Overton, 2013). For

instance, the potential reunification of North and South Korea was heavily discussed throughout the coverage of several Olympic years when the countries marched under one flag at the opening and closing ceremonies (Lee & Maguire, 2011). Another example of political symbolism in Olympic coverage is the attention given to the 1980s hockey match between the United States and the Soviet Union during the peak of the Cold War; the importance of this match as highlighted by media coverage during this time shows that there was much more at stake than the game itself (Nickerson, 1995).

Beyond nationalism and political symbolism, the Olympic games are covered throughout the world in a myriad of ways. Notably, gamification, or presenting the Olympics utilizing elements of gaming and game design techniques has allowed coverage to be more uniform and utilizes technology to reach broader audiences (Rojas-Torrijos, 2020; Eagleman, Burch, & Vooris, 2014). Additionally, presenting the games in this manner would provide the opportunity for coverage to be more equitable, as the elements used provide a standard formula to plug in to allow for representation. The successes to this have been varied – even with technological advances, more equitable coverage does not always occur in reference to gender, nationality or sport (Jones, 2013). The utilization of the internet and social media do not always align, meaning coverage and how the media presents the Games are still largely varied throughout the world, and stories are often vetted for personal gain.

Gender falls under the umbrella of inequitable coverage regarding both sports and politics, leading to the likelihood that bias and stereotypes will emerge when looking at how female athletes are viewed in news media. Specifically, scholarship presents that gender bias is still present within Olympic coverage, such as in “Gender bias in the 1996 Olympic games,” where Higgs, Weiller and Martin (2003) found that coverage between the 1992 game and the 1996

games presented improvement in equitable coverage, yet there is still bias when trying to appeal to the media audience. In conjunction, Billings (2008), Angelini and Billings (2010) and Greer and Jones (2013) all present that media narratives and audience attitudes towards Olympic coverage are still largely led by gendered stereotypes, with coverage still being dominated by men.

### **Larry Nassar**

In September of 2016, the *Indianapolis Star* reported allegations of sexual abuse against Dr. Larry Nassar by two former gymnasts (Evans, Alesia, & Kwiatkowski, 2016). In this initial report, the gymnasts state that Nassar “fondled their genitals and breasts” along with making inappropriate comments (Evans, Alesia, & Kwiatkowski, 2016). Nassar, who was no longer affiliated with USA Gymnastics as of 2015, was then fired by Michigan State University (Alesia, Kwiatkowski, & Evans, 2016). In November of 2016, Nassar was charged with three counts of sexual abuse, with Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette stated, “This is the tip of the iceberg,” with 50 victim complaints being received at the point of his press conference (Haxel, 2016). The following month, Nassar is indicted on federal child pornography charges (Mencarini, 2016).

In January of 2017, 18 women file a lawsuit against Nassar, Michigan State and Twistars Gymnastics Club, with allegations ranging from 1996 to 2016, claiming that more women were exposed to Nassar due to inaction of these agencies (Mencarini, 2017a). In February of 2017, an additional 22 charges of sexual assault are filed, with 23 more victims coming forward in June (Mencarini 2017b; Mencarini, 2017c). In July of 2017, Nassar plead guilty to federal pornography charges (Goldman, 2017). In October of 2017, Olympic Medalist McKayla Maroney comes forward with allegations of abuse, followed by Aly Raisman and Gabby

Douglas in November (Dator, 2017; Scott & Dator, 2017; McIntosh, 2017). Later that month, Nassar pleads guilty to seven counts of first-degree criminal sexual misconduct and three counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct (Kozlowski, 2017). In December of 2017 Nassar is sentenced to 60 years in prison on federal child pornography charges (Hinkley, 2017).

In January of 2018, Simone Biles came forward as a victim as well (Dator, 2018). Later that month, 156 women read victim impact statements during Nassar's sentencing hearing (Levenson, 2018). On January 24, 2018, Nassar was sentenced to 40-175 years in prison on seven counts of criminal sexual conduct, with additional charges being added February 5, 2018, on three counts of criminal sexual misconduct for 40 to 125 years (Sarkisova, 2018; Latest, 2018). Additional investigations into Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics followed. In total, at least 150 people have come forward with allegations against Larry Nassar, with abuse spanning 20 years across multiple organizations.

### **Feminist Theory in Sports**

Sports feminism is linked to a wider range of feminist thinking, theories and politics. How women are discussed in media and the actions they take correlate to the time period they are in regarding the waves of the feminist movement (Caudwell, 2011). Caudwell (2011) additionally states though that the context of what is going on in the world in which conversations take place are important, meaning when talking about feminism and sports, the level of importance or progress does not necessarily follow a linear path. Progress does not move in a straight line, allowing for sports and feminism to have pockets of advancement in different waves that occasionally overlap, such as the All-American Girls Professional Baseball Leagues existence during World War II, prior to large scale feminist action, serving in juxtaposition to baseball and softball being removed from the Olympics as the United States Women's team was

too good while the men's team was not good enough (Caudwell, 2011). Canadian sports sociologist Ann Hall formally introduced the concept of gender into the study of sports in the 1970s, offering the critique that a more feminist perspective was needed when evaluating sports and athleticism as contextualization and intersectionality are important. This usage ushered in the means and perspective to think of sports outside of the traditional male frame, leading to the development of feminist theory and later queer theory, allowing for more intersectional investigations into gender and sport (Bandy, 2014; Theberge, 1985).

As highlighted by Leslee Fisher (2020), feminist theory helps lay the groundwork for a vision to advance sports overall. "The social context of sport can be used as a site for the development of 'good' character in athletes, coaches, and administrators. The main point is that in the future world of sport, character *does* matter, and so too, *does performance*" (p. 386, *emphasis in original*). This is important to note, as gymnastics and the Olympics are shrouded in tradition in secrecy, often to the detriment of the sport. Fisher expands upon this point, utilizing feminist theory to conduct an evaluation of Larry Nassar case statements, concluding that feminist theory provides opportunity to consider the experience of female athletes and feminine qualities allow for questioning of how sports should be conducted (Fisher, 2020).

In "Is There 'Beyond Patriarchy' in Feminist Sport History?", Patricia Vertinsky outlines multiple practices researchers can engage with to, remember where we came from, but also push towards a better future, including fostering feminist coalitions and multi-generational dialogues, generate more space for ideas about gender and feminism across platforms, activities and disciplines, question how feminism relates to itself across time, take more risks while continuing to allow feminist sport discussions to evolve over time (p. 485). It is important to pay attention to



these circumstances, as they allow not only for the advancement of scholarship, but also the advancement of sports.

Previous research regarding media coverage of female athletes at the Olympics has looked at gender balance of coverage utilizing content analysis as their theoretical framework. For example, Lauren Burch, Andrea Eagleman and Paul Pedersen's (2012) reviewed the media coverage of the 2010 Olympics by looking at online media content. They found that coverage online mirrors traditional media coverage, with inequity towards female athletes, even as there was more overall coverage of women. Additionally, multiple content analysis studies have been conducted to look at NBC's Coverage of the Olympics, finding that while female participation is up, coverage of female athletes is limited to what NBC deems marketable (Davis & Tuggle, 2012; Coche & Tuggle, 2018).

In conjunction to feminist theory and queer theory, it is important to note that there can be no intersectionality without addressing the experience of athletes of color; empowerment of women in sports cannot be complete without evaluating and addressing the context of race and gender (Johnson, 2015).

### ***Intersectionality***

Intersectionality looks at how power relations influence social relations across diverse societies in addition to an individual's experience in everyday life. Intersectionality takes categories, such as race, class and gender, and looks at how they are interrelated and shape human experience (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Regarding coverage of sports, intersectionality highlights the saturation of coverage around the binary system of straight white men and white women; this system perpetuates gender stereotypes of men as strong and powerful and women as attractive. Johanna Dorer and Matthias Marschik (2020), in their study

of coverage of black and homosexual athletes, denote that coverage is positive regarding diversity of athletes, however, discrimination is still perpetuated, talking about the presentation of “other” and not the norm (Anderson & McCormack, 2010).

Black female athletes specifically are discussed as groundbreaking or seen as overcoming of circumstance when portrayed in media (Simien, Arinze & McGarry, 2019). Additionally, black female athletes are subjected not only to the same gender stereotypes that white female athletes are, but they are also subjected to racial stereotypes (Carter-Francique, 2020; Withycombe, 2011). When looking at media coverage of Lolo Jones and Serena Williams, both accomplished athletes on the Olympic and collegiate stages, media coverage is saturated with commentary regarding “appropriateness” or “blackness” in conjunction with their dominance or lacking in skill (Crosby, 2016; Tredway, 2019). This coverage demonstrates the higher level of scrutiny minority athletes face, even when they are at the top of their game. This combination of stereotyping disadvantages not only the athlete, but the view of media by perpetuating a system that is problematic when trying to provide equitable coverage to all athletes.

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory discusses that how information is presented to an audience influences how people process that information. Originally developed by Erving Goffman, framing theory puts forth that people interpret the world around them through their own situational understanding, or frames (Goffman, 1974). Media focus attention on events within a field of meaning set forth by those with organizational power (Baran & Davis, 2015). Entman (1993) expands on Goffman’s definition of framing, highlighting how those in communication fields utilize frames for their own purposes, positing that communicators use frames to identify issues, present reasoning, make judgements and propose solutions. Fairhurst and Starr (1996) highlight

how frames function. They posit that frames utilize metaphor to provide a conceptual groundwork for comparison to something else. Additionally, frames use stories to provide a narrative to information being presented. Tradition utilizes cultural norms to provide ties and significance. Language, such as slogans or catchphrases use catchy words to make information more memorable. Contrast and spin provide additional ways to build an inherent definition to a given topic, as they define what something is not while setting the groundwork or frame by creating a value judgement about the information. For example, a 2019 study of newspaper coverage of artificial intelligence denotes that how issues are framed impacts their salience (Chuan, Tsai, & Cho, 2019). They found that stories, or episodic coverage, had a larger impact, as readers had specific examples to impact their relationship with information as opposed to thematic frames, where readers had little to correlate information to (Chuan, Tsai, & Cho, 2019; Phadke & Mitra, 2020; Nelson, 2019). Framing can influence the perception of news by the audience by not only telling the audience what to think about but how to think about that issue (Baran & Davis, 2015).

### ***Gender Framing***

Regarding gender dynamics, framing theory is present across many varied topics. Whether it be discussing how men and women differ in vary areas, such as career performance and capabilities to gendered issues (e.g., the feminist movement), framing is present in the media narratives (Lind & Salo, 2002, Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997. Coverage of women is dynamic on a surface level review of scholarship (Nacos, 2005). However, when digging further into the research itself though, most of the narratives presented still highlighted women in a stereotypical manner, such as hyper-sexualized, “the weaker sex,” or unqualified (Easteal, Bartels, Nelson, & Holland, 2015; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013; Nee & Maio, 2019). For example, when

looking at how gender is framed regarding health news coverage, research shows that inequitable coverage and reinforcement of restrictive gender norms can have real world consequences related to access to care and discriminatory practices (Heise et al., 2019). This premise transfers to how gender along multiple avenues of coverage can lead to real world impacts for women (Romney & Johnson, 2019). As highlighted when looking at coverage type, when consumers are given specific examples, or episodes, they can relate to the salience of an idea is maintained, and when stereotypes, especially negative ones, it leads to a lack of diversity and representation in positions of power. Additionally, gender framing stereotypes are perpetuated based on the gender of the journalist. For example, Nikki Usher, Jesse Holcomb and Justin Littman (2018) found that males engage and amplify male voices almost exclusively, creating asymmetry in gender coverage.

### ***Athlete/Olympic Framing***

When looking at how athletes are framed, there used to be an emphasis on how athletes were framed along racial lines, with emphasis on the black athlete's physical prowess. Recent studies show though, that racial disparities in coverage are minimizing and disparities along gender lines are growing (Cranmer, Lancaster, & Harris, 2016). Further study, conducted by Travis Scheadler and Audrey Wagstaff (2018) show that if sports fans are shown equitable coverage of women and men's sports, they have a more favorable view of women's sports and women's athletes.

Regarding Olympic coverage and gender, a Polish study conducted by Honorata Jakubowska (2017) showed that regarding the framing of the winter Olympics in 2014 along gender lines, the media focused more on Polish medal winners, with no significant differences in men's and women's coverage, presenting a discourse of nationalism as more important than

gender. While it is a different media system from a different country, it does suggest that coverage not revolving around gender is attainable. Research also highlights that gender coverage becomes more equitable during the Olympics, whereas women are marginalized more when day to day sports coverage is reviewed (Jakubowska 2017; Jakubowska & Ličen, 2019). Research also presents that this premise differs depending on the nation covering the sport, or the sport being studied. For example, coverage of softball and baseball in the United States prior to the removal of both sports from the Olympics presents that coverage of the women was critical for them being too good whereas the men were criticized for not being good enough, with both genders being framed negatively (Smith, 2014).

The Olympic games themselves provide many narratives to look at in the context of framing theory (Zaharopoulos, 2007). Due to their recurring nature, the Games provide a high-profile space for nations to highlight what they consider to be their best individuals to the world. Politics, economics, sport and gender are all on display at the Olympic games, and how they are framed by mass media can provide insight not only into how the world is looking at sports and athleticism, but also how the world is advancing regarding humanitarianism, economics and, in the case of this study, gender.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

**RQ1:** What are the primary frames of the stories about the U.S. Women's Gymnastics team on the past 25 years?

**RQ2:** To what extent, if at all, is news coverage gendered when framing the Women's Gymnastics Team?

**RQ3:** How did news outlets frame the sexual assaults of members of the Women's Gymnastics team?

## **METHOD**

For this thesis, I conducted a discourse analysis to review the narratives of the Olympic gymnastics' coverage of the USA gymnastics team in 1996, 2004, 2016 and 2020. I chose a discourse analysis as the method in order to provide an opportunity to focus on the language and context of the articles reviewed to look for patterns in conjunction with providing the opportunity to review information in the articles in a broader scope as compared to a coded content analysis. Content analyses have been conducted to analyze Olympic news coverage in the past (Burch, Eagleman & Pedersen, 2012; Davis & Tuggle, 2012; Coche & Tuggle, 2018), but given the complexity of this topic, a discourse analysis allows for examining content that is difficult to code into categories.

### **Data Collection**

This study is modeled after the methodology utilized by Jennifer McClearen's (2015a) study on sexism and cissexism in mixed martial arts (MMA) fighting that examined cultural context of transgendered acceptance and inclusion in sports. McClearen's research utilizes both queer and feminist theories to look at discourse in sports, providing an outline of how to review coverage of a sport for narratives where gender and controversy often work hand-in-hand (Fischer & McClearen, 2019, McClearen 2015a, McClearen, 2015b). In this thesis, I will examine the coverage of the U.S. Gymnastics teams from 1996, 2004 and 2016 Olympics to gain an understanding of the frames, narratives and themes in the articles reviewed. The years 1996 and 2004 were chosen due to the scandal or notoriety of those Olympic Games; 1996 was highlighted by the Olympic Gold for the Women's team for the first time, and 2004 was chosen due to the judging scandals throughout international gymnastics. Finally, 2016 was chosen as a

representation of the most recent Olympic Games due to the postponement of the 2020 Games due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

I pulled articles from the database Nexis Uni for the Olympic years 1996 (Olympics from July 19, 1996 to August 4, 1996), 2004 (Olympics from August 13, 2004 to August 29, 2004) and 2016 (Olympics from August 5, 2016 to August 21, 2016), to give a modern perspective on the media coverage presented during the games. In order to view how gymnasts are discussed in 2020 following the conviction of Larry Nassar, articles from January 1, 2020 to August 31, 2020 were also reviewed, as the 2020 Olympic Games were postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Articles will be pulled using the keyword search [gymnast\* AND (olympic\* OR “olympic\* team” OR "US olympic\* team" OR “US team” OR “USA team”)] for the time frames listed above.

I discarded duplicate articles, articles printed under different headlines but were the same upon review, and articles not related to USA Olympic gymnastics (Olympics only, gymnastics only, or gymnast specific but not USA Olympic gymnastics). The 1996 Olympics garnered 57 reviewed articles, 2004 Olympics resulted in 42 articles, the 2016 Olympics resulted in 47 articles and 2020 Olympics resulted in 15 articles. From this keyword search, the articles were then filtered the publications of the *Washington Post* (47), *New York Times* (38), *Associated Press* (71) and CNN.com (5). The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were chosen for their ability to penetrate nationally, beyond their local readership as intermedia agenda setters. The *Associated Press* was chosen for its distribution to media outlets across the country, providing a similar exposure as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. CNN.com was utilized to provide a multidimensional perspective regarding news articles, as more online news outlets



became more prevalent in the modern Olympic era. From these articles, I selected every third article to review, for a sample of 161 articles.

### **Data Analysis**

The articles collected will be read closely to study themes and narratives. Lindlof and Taylor provide a model to conduct qualitative discourse analysis that emphasizes the importance and weight that qualitative methods have in communication research. Engaging in cross-comparisons of objects or information helps determine the context and importance of this information (p. 227). An in-depth review of the information develops a deeper, more intricate understanding of the object or information that quantitative methods cannot capture.

Hodder (2013) states, “The more richly networked the associations that can be followed by the interpreter, and the thicker the description ... that can be produced, the subtler the interpretations that can be made,” helping to guide the aim of this thesis. Utilizing a discourse analysis will allow me to not only evaluate the language used to describe male versus female gymnasts, but also allows for an exploration of how or if coverage of Olympic gymnastics has changed in the past 25 years. It also allows an opportunity to examine a comparatively smaller number of news articles in 2020 specifically dealing with the Nassar case, as numerically those findings might not be as predictive and would likely not capture the nuances in coverage.

## ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

The analysis of the articles presents the following results to my research questions. RQ1 asks, “What are the primary frames of the stories about the U.S. Women’s Gymnastics team on the past 25 years?” Despite the similarities of the Olympics – each largely has the same events, schedule and scoring system – each occurrence was defined by its own unique set of frames.

### Findings

#### 1996 Olympics

The 1996 Olympics took place in Atlanta, Georgia, United States took from July 19, 1996 to August 4, 1996. This Olympics is memorialized by Kerri Strug and the United States women’s gymnastics teams improbable winning of the gold medal over Romania in the team competition (Strug, 1996). This is reflected in a large portion of the articles reviewed. Following this, articles pertaining to Kerri Strug performing on an injured ankle, athlete profiles of female gymnasts—usually Dominique Dawes and Shannon Miller— along with articles regarding the women’s team as a whole and articles discussing medical costs of being a gymnast were the main topics covered in articles from 1996.

Articles from 1996 were highlighted by discussions of stature, the impact of injuries and winning the women’s team winning the team gold medal. Articles from 1996 utilized language about stature (tiny, kiddie, kids, small, diminutive) frequently while also referring to the female gymnasts as “girls” as opposed to women or female. Specifically, three articles referred to female gymnasts as tiny, “...even if they all look so tiny and cute in their tights and bows” (Wilstein, 1996a)<sup>1</sup>; one as kiddie, “...where she stood on one leg with her six kiddie teammates”

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<sup>1</sup> Page numbers were not available for citations due to accessing the newspaper articles via an online database.

(McShane, 1996); and five articles as kids, such as this quote from Boodman (1996): “These kids are destroying their bodies and we’re letting them do it.” However, articles referring to gymnasts as kids were primarily articles regarding medical concerns, where gymnasts are often referred to as children, usually because to participate in gymnastics, one must start young (Armour, 1996a; Armour, 1996b; Hanley, 1996; Aron, 1996a; Armour 1996c). Six articles refer to female gymnasts as small: “They are so small and so strong, so elfin...,” (Kastor, 1996a) and three as diminutive, “...the focus has been on the diminutive and charismatic Moceanu.” (Clarey, 1996a), for a total of 18 articles referencing the stature of female gymnasts, which is 32% of the total articles reviewed for this year. The fact that that one third of the total articles sampled for 1996, if all reviewed, contained commentary discussing the size of female gymnasts highlights problematic coverage regarding body commentary of female athletes (Clarey, 1996b; Gilbert, 1996; Boodman, 1996; Clarey, 1996c; Clarey, 1996d).

Examining coverage of the men’s team provides a juxtaposition to how their counterparts are covered. Articles discussing the men’s team were highlighted by profiles on Jair Lynch or on the disappointing finish of the men’s team competition, with seven article mentions of the men’s team, two of which were profiles about Jair Lynch (Everson, 1996; Aron, 1996b; Phillips, 1996a; Armour, 1996d; Frey, 1996; Armour, 1996e; Phillips, 1996b; Armour, 1996f). The men’s team was presented as having improved compared to past performances, even when they did not meet expectations – at one point, they were even described as “the most improved team in the world” (Armour, 1996f). The narrative surrounding the men’s team denotes generally positive coverage, even though they are never considered as good as the women, whereas the women’s team coverage leaves room for improvement, discussing how they do not always meet expectations and can do better, even when the team wins gold.

As mentioned earlier and spurred on by Kerri Strug (who had a total of 22 direct name mentions due to her performance) performing after injuring herself, a portion of the articles from 1996 discussed the pressure and medical costs of performing as an elite gymnast, with four articles addressing the stress gymnastics has both physically and mentally on the athletes (Wilstein, 1996b; Boodman, 1996; Stryer & Tofler, 1996). There are four separate articles that discuss gymnastics as a celebration of child abuse. For example, Stryer and Tofler (1996) write, “During the Atlanta Olympics some critics have said that, for adolescents, training and competition at this level are a form of child abuse.<sup>2</sup> There is much we need to do to ensure that young men and women competing at all levels are not scarred forever by athletic excesses.” This type of commentary was tangentially presented with the medical costs associated with gymnastics, including the pressure from coaches to be perfect (Hanley, 1996; Haney, 1996; Wilstein, 1996b; Kastor, 1996). This argument leaves room for journalists to pay closer attention to what occurs within the system of gymnastics, outside of the competitions. If news outlets were paying closer attention to what occurs within a sports system, including governing bodies and medical concerns, there is the opportunity to reveal or explore narratives that may need to be revealed to the public. Additionally, if more information is known, there is the opportunity to create rules and regulations regarding health and safety, such as age increases and mental health access.

### **2004 Olympics**

The 2004 Olympics took place in Athens, Greece from August 13, 2004 to August 29, 2004. The highlights of this Olympics regarding gymnastics were Carly Patterson winning the

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<sup>2</sup> While this might seem like extreme language, there were concerns about when athletes started training, and those concerns were addressed – the minimum age for a gymnast to compete in the Olympics was raised from 15 to 16 starting in 1997.

individual all-around gold medal for the women, Paul Hamm winning the individual all-around gold medal (and the controversy that followed due to errors in judging), and both the men's and women's teams earning the silver in the team all-around competitions.

Articles from 2004 highlighted discussions of modernization of language surrounding female athletes and both US teams winning the silver medal. Articles from 2004 presented a slight change in language towards female gymnasts. Athleticism and strength are mentioned more, with a total of eight combined mentions to strength or power and athleticism. Clarke (2004a) described the athletes as, "Strong. Sturdy. Just like we expected." In addition, there is a few mentions of artistry falling out of fashion, as "the judges to shift their sights from artistry to athleticism. Speed and power soon supplanted grace as the prized elements in a [gymnastics] program," harkening back to athleticism becoming more prevalent in gymnastics (Litke, 2004a). Six articles discussed the female athletes as women and only three referred to them as girls, such as Pells (2004c): "We do all we can do to put these girls under pressure during our selection process." When referring to the female athletes as girls, it is important to note those instances were quotes from older gymnast Russian Svetlana Khorkina and U.S. coach Martha Karolyi, both of whom were longstanding participants in the system of gymnastics that perpetuated stereotypes of female gymnasts, whereas the mentions of gymnasts as women was more salient in articles discussing female athletes outside of those quotes.

The final primary narrative found of the 2004 coverage was the discussion of both the men and women's teams each earning a silver medal in the team competition. There were 13 total articles discussing the winning of silver medals, with the men primarily being framed as victorious due to their past failures as a team, as noted by Shipley (2004):

For the U.S. men's gymnastics team, it's been a long four years. For the entire men's program, it's been a long two decades. On Monday night, a frustrating era came to a close

as six unshakable men seized the silver medal with the same authority, they grabbed the high bar in the nerve-wracking finale of the Olympic team final.

The women were discussed as winners as well; however, articles still cling to the narrative that they are world champions and should be better than silver, even if it is an accomplishment, as highlighted by the following quote from the *Associated Press* article, “Stumbles and bumbles cost U.S. women gymnasts gold; Minor miscues costly; team gets silver” (2004):

Silver is hardly anything to be ashamed of, of course. The U.S. men won one Monday night and were positively giddy. And it's far better than leaving empty-handed, which the U.S. women did in Sydney for the first time since 1976. But these women are world champions, winners of every international meet they've entered since 2002 and perhaps the best team the United States has ever put on the floor. This was supposed to be their coronation.

## **2016 Olympics**

The 2016 Olympics took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from August 6, 2016 to August 21, 2016. The highlights of these Olympics include a discussion of Simone Biles and her successes and the U.S. women's team continued domination of gymnastics, along with discussions of Gabby Douglas and her “disinterest” in the Games and her teammates.

Articles from 2016 are highlighted by a more diverse tone to coverage, as highlighted by the discussions of dominance of the US women's team, the comparison discussion of Gabby Douglas to Simone Biles and a distinct lack of coverage regarding the abuse scandals beginning to come to light in 2016. There is more of an emphasis on diversity of the team, primarily from a racial standpoint (although there is reference to this in 1996, it is more prevalent here) with mentions of Simone Biles and Gabby Douglas highlighted as African American women succeeding in gymnastics. This is especially true for Biles, who is discussed as the best female gymnast in the world and possibly ever (Rosenberg, 2016; Haynes Whack, 2016).

From an appearance perspective, there is also little to no discussion on the size of the athletes, outside of mentioning their height directly, highlighting a change in tone from past years. Female gymnasts were discussed more in the vein of athleticism as opposed to artistry: “Modern gymnastics relies more on strength and dynamism than it did just a couple of decades ago, so gymnasts with more athletic physiques are better able to perform today's repertoire” (Meyers, 2016). This may be due to changes inside of USA gymnastics also discussed in the 2016 articles, along with the popularity of Simone Biles. As mentioned above, Simone Biles turned the narrative of gymnastics on its head, “the powerful, explosive Biles, who is 4 feet 8 of solid muscle” (Clarke, 2016a), with articles discussing not her only athletic prowess but also her magnetism, “Biles - giggled that everyone in the Athletes' Village is so tall that she fears, she might get stepped on,” (Clarke, 2016e). Biles is mentioned in nearly every article, with 47 total name mentions in 48 articles. Each of these mentions discusses Biles as a hard-working, bubbly personality who is taking the world of gymnastics by storm.

In contrast, Gabby Douglas, the 2012 Olympic all-around gold medal champion was lampooned by the media during the 2016 Olympics: “Douglas fought back tears when reporters' questions about her performance turned to questions about a wide range of criticism that has been directed at her,” (Clarke, 2016a). Douglas, a prolific athlete in her own right, was discussed largely negatively. Douglas received heavy criticism for appearing disinterested in the Games, for not cheering on her teammates and most concerningly regarding her physical appearance (Clarke, 2016a; Graves, 2016b; Rieken, 2016). Highlighted by this quote from Graves (2016a), “It followed a familiar pattern that's followed Douglas around since London, when she oddly found herself having to defend her hair minutes after becoming the first African-

American woman to win the Olympic title,” the articles discussing Douglas provide a stark contrast to the narratives of Simone Biles.

Lastly of note in the 2016 articles is that we see the first few mentions of abuse inside of USA Gymnastics; however, there is little to no detail with only two articles mentioning abuse allegations, and abuse is primarily mentioned in reference to keeping the gymnasts unaware of the scandal and focused on the games.

### **2020 Olympics**

The 2020 Olympics were supposed to have taken place from July 24, 2020 to August 9, 2020, however, they were postponed to July 23, 2021 to August 8, 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to these circumstances, articles from an Olympic year were not available for a current day evaluation. As a result, articles from January 1, 2020 to August 31, 2020 covering the U.S. women’s gymnastics team were reviewed. The intent is to provide a snapshot of news coverage given that the Games were not held.

Articles from 2020 fell under the following topics: the postponement of the Olympics and what that can mean for athletes whose sport necessitates them being young and small; and the abuse scandals that have rocked USA Gymnastics in the light of the Larry Nassar scandal. These articles, due to the heavy nature of their topics, were a stark contrast to the articles of the previous time periods. Articles in 2020 called for change to current power structures within USA Gymnastics. These articles also demanded respect and understanding for gymnasts while continuing to probe for details in the hopes of greater accountability for past miscarriages of justice.

As stated above, articles about gymnasts and the 2020 Olympics mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts had on the sport. This coverage frames gymnasts as devastated



their Olympic dream being postponed, some athletes discussing how the pandemic has influenced them personally, if they will even participate in the games now that they will be in 2021 and the unknown impacts the postponement will have on gymnastics on a broader level regarding age requirements, policies and who can or will participate in the games:

The rescheduling of the Olympics has hit female gymnasts particularly hard, considering that their window for Olympic success is so tiny. Most female Olympic gymnasts are teenagers who compete in only one Summer Games before their bodies mature, adding weight and height that make it harder to twist and flip. They also start the sport so young, much younger than their male counterparts, that their bodies break down and can't last (Macur, 2020a).

The other primary topic of discussion was the unveiling of abuse within the power structure of USA Gymnastics. The Larry Nassar allegations that came to light in 2018 of sexual abuse exposed years of coverup from USA Gymnastics regarding both physical and mental abuse from coaches and doctors. Articles reviewed for this thesis show that blame was being squarely placed on USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee. Specifically, articles discuss an abuse of power within the structure of USA Gymnastics to coverup accusations. Articles also included narratives of the disregard of complaints, if any were made by gymnasts about abuse. In conjunction with articles that discussed complaints, articles discussed future reparations for USA Gymnastics including monetary compensations to impacted athletes and structural changes that need to be addressed in the governing body. Former athletes were also interviewed, highlighting that an institution that should have kept them safe failed to do so, only paying attention to them when they served their purpose of winning. Athletes also supported the notion that structural changes and transparency needs to be made so what occurred in the past does not continue. As Sally Jenkins (2020) wrote in the *Washington Post*:

America's gymnasts should refuse to settle their sexual abuse case until they have so bankrupted the U.S. Olympic movement that there's no option but to start over, with a completely new governing structure. That would be justice, and it also would be the

safest thing for everyone's kids. We need to get our athletes out from under this victimizing, money-siphoning, bungling, indifferent, predatory system.

## **Discussion**

### **1996 Olympic Gymnastics Coverage**

Articles from 1996 spent a decent amount of space referring to the stature of the gymnast. The use of language in the articles from referring to the stature of female gymnasts appears to be anecdotal; however, the frequency of the use of this type of language is problematic as it takes away from the accomplishments of these athletes. As highlighted in the literature review in the Daniel's article "She Represents Strength in Women": Young Women's Reactions to Images of Female Athletes, how athletes, especially female athletes are covered or portrayed by the media influences how the audience perceives them and continual, even when done casually, comments about stature continues pushing the narrative that female gymnasts are young and childlike even when they are grown women, trying to forge their own path within a sport clouded primarily in secrecy.

Articles from 1996 primarily focus on the U.S. women's team winning the gold medal over Romania as well. The language used to describe them, highlights the idea that women are still stereotyped in their coverage, as when discussing the team, the language and tone used in one of awe or surprise. The women's team received more volume of coverage as compared to the men's contrasting with existing literature; however, the women are still discussed in news coverage at least partially through the use of stereotypes – in this case, with the athletes being viewed as childlike.

### **2004 Olympic Gymnastics Coverage**

Articles from 2004 transition from a discussion of athletes as childlike and small to one of women who are capable of athletic feats as opposed to artistic endeavors. For example, "The

U.S. women arrived in Athens with enormous expectations after being shut out of the medals at the 2000 Olympics,” (Clarke, 2004d). The changing of how female gymnasts are discussed regarding athletic prowess versus artistry may be a result of the rule changes regarding age; however, most gymnasts are still young and this change in tone may have more to do with a cultural shift between the eight years reviewed as to how women were being discussed in media than a specific change in understanding of the dynamics of female athletes. This tonal difference continues to highlight the more critical eye that female athletes are viewed under, denoting that even though progress was made in frames used between 1996 and 2004, that progress is still needed.

This aspect also largely appeared in articles where Carly Patterson is compared to Svetlana Khorkina, who Patterson beat out for the gold medal (Litke, 2004a). It is important to note this, as previously gymnastics was discussed of as more of an art form than a feat of athletic ability, as exhibited by Svetlana Khorkina’s exasperation when interviewed about Carly Patterson’s gold medal: “She also faulted judges for valuing ‘mechanic tumbling’ – a dig at the athletic Patterson – over ‘grace, elegance and beauty,’” even though mentions of strength were highlighted throughout (Clarke, 2004c).

Articles from 2004 also present the narrative of discussion between the US men’s and women’s team both winning silver medals. The men’s team is largely discussed positively as this is a surprise success whereas the women’s team is discussed in tones of disappointment, as they should have won gold. Also present in these articles is a conversational tone of the women’s stature and athletic prowess, continuing the problematic trend of discussing women’s bodies, relevant or not to the main topic of the article.

## **2016 Olympic Gymnastics Coverage**

Articles from 2016 highlight a transition of how female athletes are now discussed. There is mostly a positive tone when reviewing the article, especially in articles discussing the team as a whole or when profiling Simone Biles. When looking at the trajectory of these articles, starting from 1996 to 2016, we can see the path from the narratives discussed transition over time, in conjunction with access athletes now have to the public via social media. This access to social media is important to note, as athletes now have the opportunity to interact more with the general public, which can in turn impact how journalists and the public view an athlete. Given these significant changes, we can see how they become even more prolific and approachable, showing that audiences respond to not only contact with athletes (albeit from a distance) but also in how news outlets respond to how journalists talk about athletes, leading to a change in tone and audience perceptions of the gymnasts.

Articles profiling Biles and Douglas highlight that athlete success has little to do with how they are discussed as they are both All-Around champions, with Douglas winning the gold medal in 2012 and Biles in 2016. Additionally, stereotypes and bias will still seep through into coverage, as most articles positively discussed Biles while Douglas was mentioned mostly negatively even though they are both Black athletes competing for the same team in the same sport.

Additionally, in 2016, the first mention of the sexual abuse scandal occurs. The articles that mention the abuse only serve to highlight that the information is being kept from the members of the team. Keeping the information from the gymnasts that abuse allegations came out was a naïve choice on the part of USA Gymnastics, as we later find out members of the 2016 team were victims of abuse. Additionally, discussing the abuse allegations in the frame of

distractions can set the narrative that these allegations are not serious, when, sexual assault and abuse issues were prevalent throughout the USA Gymnastics system.

### **2020 Gymnastics Coverage**

Articles from 2020 take on a different tone from prior years. These articles, as stated present a stark contrast to the previous years of coverage. As mentioned, due to the postponement of the Olympics until 2021, there is less coverage to review. Most articles from this year present a discussion of the response, or lack of response that USA Gymnastics had regarding the Larry Nassar abuse fallout. The nature of the crime admittedly places constraints on journalists, as they are unlikely to be able to interview athletes about what they have had to endure—at least not in the same episodic approach that would normally be applied to the Games coverage. Additionally, coverage shifted to examining the institution rather than the individual gymnasts or the team, which is similar to at least a portion of the coverage from the 1996 games that focused on the inherent challenges that gymnasts faced at the time. Coverage from 2020 also looks at what the postponement of the Olympics to 2021 will mean for athletes who are gymnasts. As highlighted, most gymnasts are young, and a year postponement can have a physical and mental toll due to the unforeseen nature of the postponement.

Overall, there are a mention of the abuses a body can take and the pressure gymnasts face. However, mentions of outright physical or mental abuse was nearly invisible prior to article published in 2016, which is problematic considering how many athletes came forward about being abused.

### **Research Question 2**

RQ2 asks, “To what extent, if at all, does news coverage change over time to with regard to how the Women’s Gymnastics Team is framed?” The primary narratives found in the articles

reviewed are that the women's team gets more attention than the men's team, there is continual controversy that shifted during each of the four time periods that were analyzed, commentary on the body of the gymnast and a tone of self-deprecation or modesty when the athlete talks about themselves.

In contrast to most sports where there are male and female teams, gymnastics presents the overarching trend where the women's team has more coverage than the men. This can be shown through the number of articles that are framed around the women's team versus the men's, with only 17% of the articles studied focusing on the men's team. The year 2004 is the only one where the gender breakdown of coverage is evenly distributed between genders, and this can be at least partially explained by the gold medal judging scandal of the men's individual all-around finals result. This parity in coverage was not reflected in the outcome of the Games – in the 2004 Olympics, the women's team performed better than the men's team historically, with a medal count breakdown of 6 total medals for the men and 16 total medals for the women (USA Gymnastics, n.d.).

While the men's team received less coverage, it is still framed with positive language and tone, discussing past disappointments, but with a tone conveying that, in the future, the team will continue to get better. Despite that optimism, the team did not necessarily improve, such as when discussing Jair Lynch, a male gymnast on the 1996 U.S. Men's team, about overcoming challenges of the past to become an Olympic champion. Additionally, when discussing the 2004 men's team silver medal win or the 2016 team, news outlets used the narrative of battling furiously into medal contention, even as they failed in their goals. The women, however, are discussed more frequently with the tone being one of awe - how can one so small to something so powerful – such as Dominique Moceanu, aged 14 flipping and bouncing her way around the

arena: “a new groomed-for-stardom sprite, 14-year-old Dominique Moceanu, will flip and bounce her way across Olympic TV screens this week. If you enjoy pixie gymnasts, don't miss her, because the littlest ones will be getting bigger next time” (Hanley, 1996). Additionally, Carly Patterson’s description as the 16-year-old dynamo, being athletic for her stature, “Patterson isn't nearly the showwoman. Nor is she as graceful a ballerina as Khorkina. But she's more athletic, more explosive, and on this night, she was just a little bit better,” (Pells, 2004f). The myriad of commentary in 2016 regarding Simone Biles being only nineteen, 4’ 8” and the best in the world highlights, that even as narratives of the gymnasts progressed to become more well-rounded, the descriptive terms used still resort back to discussions of size and mental fortitude. For example, Juliet Macur (2016) uses the following statement to describe Simone Biles:

...a gymnastics wonder woman, the kind of gymnast who comes along once in a generation. She is a natural talent, with a work ethic to match. Without her ability to tune out pressure, the gold medal could have been out of reach. The stress would have crushed her...All 4 feet 8 inches of her stood atop the podium.

Macur’s description of Biles, when looking at just the words is complimentary. However, a deeper review of the articles as a whole, in addition to the perspective of the time period, provides the context that gymnasts are still described as mentally strong, with nerves of steel, but they are still just small women. Additionally, this is supported by the mentions of coaches and trainers in articles getting credit for putting the programs together or pushing the gymnasts, framing them as the adult in the narrative.

Coaches receive a lot of mention regarding the women’s team, with a large amount of credit for successes given to them, especially Martha and Bela Karolyi, who both ran the women’s team consecutively from 1996 to 2016, as highlighted by the following, “The critical eye, firm hand and warm embrace of Bela Karolyi have molded women's gymnastics for the past three decades, producing the perfection of Romania's Nadia Comaneci in 1976 [prior to the

Karolyi's defecting to the United States] and the sparkle of America's Mary Lou Retton in 1984," (Clarke, 2004d). Much credit is given to the Kaoyli's for creating the "powerhouse" that is USA Women's gymnastics, as emphasized by Will Graves in 2016: "The U.S. has won every major international competition since 2011, a combination of the fruits of the semi-centralized system Karolyi perfected when she took over in 2001" (Graves, 2016c).

Credit is given, ranging from building the team (the Karolyi's) or molding the gymnast (individual coaches), sometimes at the cost of the athletes' motivations: "Coaches are often role models for these vulnerable young girls who strive to attain their mentor's approval" (Boodman, 1996). Coaches have influence over gymnasts from a young age, which can be a positive relationship, providing examples for gymnasts to follow and leadership for younger female athletes. The issue here, as we see when the abuse scandals within USA Gymnastics come to light, is when the relationships transition in abuses of the power structures in place, a sentiment Boodman explores later in the article when talking about a coach's judgement can become a large part of the identity of an elite gymnast.

One constant throughout the coverage was the presence of controversy surrounding gymnastics, though the topic varied. From 1996 to 2020, there were three narratives that sparked debate in the articles. In 1996, Kerri Strug injured herself on the vault and continued to perform even though injured, leading to a large amount of conversation about gymnasts being pushed too hard to do too much while being so young. In 2004, Paul Hamm received the gold medal for the men's individual all around; however, there were issues in an opponent's scoring that meant Hamm should not have received the gold. This became controversial when the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG, translated as such due to the French to English translation) requested that Hamm give his gold medal to his opponent; however, according to the governing



rules he was under no obligation to do so. Gymnastics scoring has continually undergone changes leading to confusion and anger, either due to lack of understanding of the rules or lack of consistency by a governing body. Years 2016 and 2020 both have mentions of the abuse scandal that rocked USA gymnastics; however, this narrative is primarily noticeable in 2020 articles, as this is two years following the Larry Nassar convictions—again, this sample was different than the previous years examined of Olympic news coverage because the Games were canceled due to COVID-19.

The Larry Nassar allegations and conviction shed light on how deep abuse – ranging from sexual assault to verbal abuse – ran with the organizational structure of USA gymnastics. The discussion, in nearly all the articles from review in 2020, supported those who were abused and discuss how the changes and actions that have been made or taken are not nearly enough, including a settlement offer of \$215 million (to be distributed amongst Nassar’s victims), accusations of covering up Nassar’s abuse and lack of a plan to prevent abuses from happening in the future. Additionally, these articles from 2020 discuss how there is a long way to go to repair how athletes feel about USA gymnastics as a governing body.

This year also provided a specific narrative of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted gymnasts; due to the nature of the sport – being young and agile – athletes were discussing how this impacts their future in a sport where success is fleeting. This commentary primarily shows up when discussing female gymnasts who are younger than their male counterparts (Macur, 2020; Clarke, 2020). Female gymnasts, coaches and officials all discuss how unknown the future is, especially regarding age and requirements and how teams will be built. While the Olympic team was set, gymnasts who were too young to compete in 2020 would be eligible to compete in 2021 (Sheinin, 2020).

These are a few of the many unanswerable questions surrounding the 2020 Olympics as, at the time of the writing of this thesis, the COVID-19 pandemic is still underway. However, the narratives presented here mirror the idea that female gymnasts receive a large portion of the coverage as compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, female gymnasts are still viewed through the lens of their youth and the limitations this puts on their gymnastics careers.

Also, of note in the narratives of gymnastics is the casual way the body of gymnast's, especially female gymnasts are discussed. Terminology including the phrasing of diminutive, "women who must remain diminutive and adorable" (Kastor, 1996), "it prizes a small childlike body in the female athletes" (Gilbert, 1996), and pixie, "in a sport dominated by pixies too young for a driver's license" (Clarey, 1996d), all demonstrate how female gymnasts were discussed in 1996. One can see a transition happening in 2004, when Carly Patterson won the gold medal in the women's all-around competition. Here, we start to see the transition to strength, sturdiness and athleticism, straying away from the artistic (Pells, 2004f; Pells, 2004b). It is important to note though, that height and weight are still mentioned, and a tone of awe, "Barely 5 feet tall and 97 pounds, she glides across it [balance beam] with unusual lightness and poise," that people this small can do this much is still present throughout the narratives (Clarke, 2004b). Gymnasts also when talking about themselves and what they can do, discuss themselves in a self-deprecating or modest manner. Credit is rarely given to themselves but is given to their coaching and continually being pushed to do better and be better, most specifically in reference to Kerri Strug and her performance on an injured ankle in 1996, "She does not, she said, feel like a hero. Everyone else had put so much time and sacrifice into it. I couldn't give up" (Aron, 1996c). Another example of this came with coverage of Aly Raisman and her decision to return to Olympic competition in 2016, where a commentary questioned that someone of her advanced

age could compete: “‘I think it has been an uphill battle for Aly, proving to Martha [Karolyi] and the selection committee that a girl in her 20s could still do it and could earn that spot,’ Johnson said” (Clarke, 2016b).

### *Shifts in News Coverage Analysis*

The articles reviewed in 1996, 2004, 2016 and 2020 present narratives that include dynamic discussions of the gymnasts while still primarily highlighting the idea that these are little girls doing wondrous physical feats. While this may be true, as we have seen discussed in previous literature, how female athletes are viewed and discussed has an impact on how they are received by their audience. Especially in light of the allegations of verbal and physical abuse, female gymnasts are still being discussed in a narrative tone that disparages their successes, with articles primarily centering the failures of USA Gymnastics when discussing abuses. Articles referencing the COVID-19 pandemic center on the possibility that age and lack of training will prevent athletes competing in the future, with the focus being on female gymnasts as this being an issue, as few compete past their early twenties. Articles from 1996, 2004 and 2016 primarily discuss stature, medical issues and results with less nuance than those in more modern times, however, this may be due to the allegations of abuse coming to light in 2018, which is centered between the 2016 and 2020 articles.

The articles reviewed highlight how USA gymnastics coverage has changed in the past 25 years. The research shows that how female athletes are talked about has progressed. Words and phrases used in 1996 and even 2004 are less prevalent in 2016, and especially 2020, and if they are used, they are primarily called out. For example, an article discussing a Bob Costas interview with Aly Raisman and Simone Biles in 2016 shows that how athletes, specifically

female gymnasts, cannot continue as it did in the past, as it is now considered uninteresting and lacking in depth to talk to female athletes as if they are fluff.

Coverage, specifically in 2016 and 2020 utilize phrases and tones that present the female athlete as strong and multifaceted. Articles from 1996 and 2004, though to a lesser extent in 2004, present female gymnasts as little girls following the lead of those within in positions of authority. It cannot go without mention, that the exposure of the abuse scandals within USA Gymnastics forged a path regarding how gymnastics is discussed. Caudwell (2011) and Fisher (2014) both present examples as to why context and historical perspective are important when discussing sports, especially female led sports; it leads to change. Articles from 2020 specifically highlight these narrative changes, even if the breadth of coverage has not yet extended to reach its potential.

### **Research Question 3**

RQ3 asks, “How did news outlets frame the sexual assaults of members of the Women’s Gymnastics team?” Discussions of sexual abuse are absent from the articles reviewed from 1996 and 2004. The only mention of abuse, in any context, from 1996 data is where articles discussed gymnastics practices as child abuse as highlighted by the Stryer and Tofler (1996) article “Peppy, plucky—and overtrained?” where the authors highlight practices such as all-day training and lack of mental health resources as problematic. Similarly, there is no mention at all of abuse, in any form, in articles reviewed from 2004.

Articles from 2016 have the first mention of sexual abuse allegations, though there are few and these articles only mention the abuse as a distraction or as not involving the current team, which we later find out to be false as Aly Raisman, Gabby Douglas and Simone Biles came forward as victims of Larry Nassar’s abuse (Clarke, 2016c; Clark, 2016d). Both articles, by

Liz Clarke of the *Washington Post* look at the abuse through the lens of avoiding distracting the team from their ultimate goal of winning the gold medal:

They don't need any distractions right now," Aimee Boorman, coach of three-time world champion Simone Biles and head coach of the U.S. women's team, explained when asked about the **gymnasts'** awareness of the issue. Instead, Boorman and U.S. national team director Martha Karolyi continually remind the **gymnasts** that they're prepared. Their routines are etched in muscle memory. And there's nothing out of the ordinary about Rio despite the massive road closures, security presence and fireworks that were to light the Opening Ceremonies (Clarke, 2016c).

This is an interesting take for the head coach and director of the US Gymnastics team to take, as later the sexual abuse allegations highlight how many people were directly aware of abuse and did not report the information to SafeSport, the reporting body for abuse allegations for USA Olympics. This hindsight knowledge makes the decision to keep this news from the gymnasts questionable and has a narrative affect when looking at how the coaches and directors within USA Gymnasts are framed in articles from 2020 or the articles reviewed for the literature review. Specifically, phrasing such as “unacceptable,” “failing to protect” and “doesn’t take this seriously” highlight how USA Gymnastics is talked about when reviewing narratives of abuse in articles from 2020 (Macur, 2020b; Levenson, 2020).

Coaches and authority figures in USA Gymnastics were later fired or resigned due to their handling of the sexual abuse. Articles from this year are primarily about the fallout from the sexual abuse scandal while being highly critical of USA Gymnastics and supportive of the victims. Heavily discussed is the breaking down of the USA Gymnastics leadership, including moving training facilities to Indiana from the Karolyi Ranch in Texas and how USA Gymnastics is not doing enough to compensate victims or build toward change (Macur & Allentuck, 2020; Macur 2020b; Clarke, 2020b).

Interestingly, the articles frame the victims of sexual abuse here positively. This is highlighted by the discussion of a potential settlement of \$215 million not being enough for the USA Gymnastics victims, especially when they want transparency and answers (Macur, 2020b). Additionally, when discussing activism and female athletes, one article sums up the conversation surrounding the narrative of the victims of Larry Nassar when talking about Simone Biles:

“The very juxtaposition of Simone Biles' greatness in contrast to the depths of mistreatment and betrayal on the part of U.S.A. Gymnastics speaks volumes about her,” Staurowsky said. “You would hope that these kinds of stories that have been amplified this year would lead to the substantive change that sport needs” (Robbins, 2020).

### ***Sexual Assault Framing Analysis***

When looking at narratives of abuse, there was a rapid transition between 2016 and 2020. Prior to this time, mentions of abuse outside of the potential physical or mental toll was absent from coverage. When looking at coverage in 2016, there is little mention of abuse, and only as a distraction for the team, which is problematic, as members of the team were victims of Nassar's abuse, but also as it is a dishonest representation of USA Gymnastics to the American public. Most articles present the victims, world-class athletes, as such, which is a change from how victims of abuse are normally discussed. While this description is true – these women are, in fact, world-class athletes, news coverage of abuse and sexual assault has routinely ignored accomplishments and celebrity status of the victims, and the difference in victims becomes largely indistinguishable. Therefore, it is noteworthy that these news articles were adamant in acknowledging what made these women different.

Literature shows that victims are usually framed neutrally or negatively. It is possible more traditional narratives of abuse would have been present if the victims had not been who they are – young, popular athletes who were children when they were abused. Additionally, their abuser (Larry Nassar) was someone who was a part of the systemic power structure who was

supposed to provide care and safety to them, that was then later covered up by multiple governing bodies as highlighted by the timeline of Nassar's assaults.

Research also shows that the sensationalism of a story can have an impact on how the information is portrayed. The context of this story – young, strong women who have been highlighted as successes and national treasures – were abused on a scale never seen before, and who they were fed directly into what happened to them. USA Gymnastics did not report or address the abuse because it would have brought down tarnished the success, which occurred anyway. However, this only occurred as someone reported the abuse that happen to them. Research also shows that while USA Gymnastics is no longer looked at in a positive light (and neither is Larry Nassar) there has been little to no long-term solutions or changes brought in to ensure these abuses do not happen again, which mirrors more traditional sexual assault coverage and circumstances. The sensationalism and individual nature of this story is what garnered the type of coverage this scandal received; there has been little to no change in how other sexual assaults are covered, even when people have more of an awareness that there should be.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

For this study, a discourse analysis of the narratives and the frames of the United States gymnastic team were studied looking primarily at newspaper articles in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Associated Press* and CNN.com. Research specifically focused on newspapers articles, as the period of study ranged from 1996 to 2020, and print media, outside of television, was the largest avenue that people obtained news. Framing theory was also used to conduct this study, as it lays a good foundation for how to look at print media.

Future research on this topic could include an expansion to additional forms of media. The Olympics are covered in a myriad of ways, ranging from newspapers, television, magazines and social media. Reviewing how gymnasts are portrayed in photographs and in television coverage could provide additional narratives or frames both visually and in television both visually and linguistically. Social media also provides opportunity for more interaction with athletes and more opportunity to look at how athletes are discussed, leaving room for more review of frames and narratives. Additionally, future research can also look at additional Olympic time periods to provide broader historical context of how United States gymnasts were discussed in the media. Future research could also explore a larger sample to evaluate news coverage for how intersectionality might impact the frames and narratives utilized by media outlets.

Despite the room for improvement, the current study adds context to existing literature of how young female athletes are described in news media, presenting that while there has been advantageous change in descriptive terms, narratives of female athletes are still primarily focused on the body of the athlete. The allegations of abuse within USA Gymnastics provided a



unique narrative to explore, however, this research shows the type of coverage seen here was an outlier and not the norm when exploring narratives of abuse.

## CONCLUSION

The research's objective was to gain an understanding of the content of the discussion of gymnastics, specifically the female gymnast in the last 25 years. This is a worthy goal, as women's athletics is getting more popular each year and the discourse surrounding female athletics is becoming more nuanced, as indicated by the results of this study. Highlighted in the research here is the growth of coverage between each Olympic period studied. In 1996, we saw the primary discussion of female gymnasts still as girls, with awe and surprise at their capabilities. In 2004, just eight years later, we see the tides turning from artistry and poise to athleticism and strength. 2016 and 2020 together, though in different ways, highlight the strength a female athlete must exhibit to be successful as a gymnast. 2016 presented narratives about strength and physicality and mental fortitude. Simone Biles, the most decorated female gymnast was the center of the strength and control conversations. Gabby Douglas, on the other hand, showed strength by admitting to emotional vulnerability and the human side of the athlete. 2020 is where the "dirty laundry" of USA Gymnastics is shown and exhibits why context is important and that being an athlete, especially a young, female athlete requires not only physical strength but also immense mental fortitude. Articles from 2020 also show that progress in sport has been made regarding female athletics. Athletes are no longer taking the back seat in the narrative; they are speaking out and working for changes themselves.

When looking at articles discussing the sexual misconduct and abuse within USA Gymnastics, there was alarmingly little coverage before 2016. Narratives discussed in 1996 only discuss abuse in the context of child abuse due to the physical and mental toll gymnastics can have on the athlete. With hindsight from 2020, the research here shows that there were ongoing problems of systemic abuse that was largely ignored by multiple power structures. Ranging from

USA gymnastics to individual coaches, both physical and mental abuse were ignored in deference to building a powerful team made up of young women. When taking into account how these female athletes were described in articles, in conjunction with how they were treated by coaches and the public, with multiple references to size and infantilization, it unfortunately comes as no surprise that abuses were rampant within this organization. There was no mention of abuse in 2004, which additionally highlights the problem of abuse being covered with hindsight perspective. 2016 only highlighted abuse allegations as starting to come to light and as a distraction, which is a problematic frame for coaches and USA gymnastics to take, as we later find out gymnasts on the 2016 team were victims of sexual abuse. By highlighting the abuse allegations as a distractions, they continued to prop up a problematic power structure that focused only on winning with little regard to the humanity of their athletes, some of which they had known since they were young children. This year, 2020, presents a large shift in the topic of abuse, discussing female athletes and the power structures that failed to keep them safe. The research shows, in conjunction with the literature, that how the victims were framed in 2020 differs largely from the norm of how sexual assault victims are normally viewed. When media covers narratives of sexual abuse victims, they highlight their background- who they are and where they are from and what they were doing at the time of their assault, creating a structure for viewers or readers to decide if an individual is “worthy” of victimization status. However, the coverage of the USA Gymnastics abuse scandal is unique; the victims here, as world class athletes, who are young and female, were largely framed positively, with a large amount of criticism aimed at their abusers and the structures in place that bred the grounds for their abuse. Unfortunately, this circumstance is not a sign of a bigger shift in discourse surrounding coverage of sexual assault victims

Literature shows that context in which abuse occurs is important when information is presented to the public. Primarily, that individual incidents are shown as opposed to coverage of large-scale systemic instances of abuse, and that the more sensational the story, the more the coverage. The abuse concerns from USA Gymnastics show that episodic coverage of sexual abuse is a continued problem as, even two years later, as no long-term solution has come about and that the only reason this coverage still permeates is due to the upcoming Olympics. Additionally, these articles extend the premise that context is important, as due to the nature of who the victims were- young, female athletes- the media considered them to be above reproach. There was little to no stereotypical assault coverage, as these women were discussing assaults that happened to them when they were minors and those who conducted the abuses were supposed to be in positions of authority and were supposed to protect them.

Overall, this research advances feminist theory when utilizing the framework and guidelines outlined by Patricia Vertinsky (2012), who highlighted the importance of fostering feminist coalitions and multi-generational dialogues. Additionally, this research shows that progress can only be made when systemic power structures are questioned and risks are taken to push against power. We cannot move forward with a better future for athletics, regardless of gender, if we do not look with clear eyes to the past and remember that progress is not linear.

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## **VITA**

Kimberly Friedman, born in Staten Island, New York, received her bachelor's degree from the University of South Florida where she majored in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences with a concentration in Criminology and Political Science. Kimberly has worked in victim's advocacy and government operations prior to attending the Manship School of Mass Communication in August of 2019. Kimberly worked as a graduate assistant in LSU Libraries. She anticipates graduating with her M.M.C. degree in May 2021. Kimberly plans to pursue a career in political communication in Texas.